

Women in Ministry: What Does the Bible Say?

by Sharon C. Pearson

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Did the church send forth men or women to preach the gospel? The church sent forth such as God called, whether male or female, though, because of social conditions, most of those sent then, as now, were men. In Christ Jesus there is neither male or female. God has in both the old and new dispensations called women to his work and has set his seal of approval upon their labors. There are today multitudes of souls who have been brought to Christ through the ministry of faithful, Spirit-anointed women. To condemn their work in such a capacity is to condemn the God whose blessing is upon their labors and who saves souls who hear them. Beware lest you fight against God.

—C.W. Naylor, *The Gospel Trumpet*, April 25, 1918.

The question is still alive. "Beware!" is still included in the answer—but for some that warning is against the ministry of women in the church. From our earliest years, the Church of God has affirmed the ministry and leadership of women in the church. "It is probably safe to say that no other movement either religious or secular in this period of American history, except the suffrage movement itself, had such a high percentage of women leaders whose contribution was so outstanding."¹

Always too, from the beginning, the authority appealed to was the Bible. The fervent commitment of the early pioneers was to submit the life and thought of the church to the claims of Scripture. Into our second century of witness the Church of God reformation movement must again answer the question with all of its life and thought, "Did the church send forth men or women to preach the gospel?" May we be, more than ever today, a distinctive voice in the church and in the world.

The vision of the church, then and now, is properly born of the revelation recorded in Scripture. The event of Jesus Christ is the proclamation of its pages. It seems natural then for those who expect to find some answer, some direction from Scripture, first to investigate the record of Jesus' life and ministry among women. Who were the women he encountered? How did he relate to them? How did they respond to him? We know because they became a part of the gospel story. His impact upon their lives was recorded for us.

Three of those women became known as leaders among the group of women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome. Others include the woman unclean with her feminine infirmity, the despised Samaritan woman who asked Jesus for "the crumbs" for her daughter, and the woman who anointed Jesus. And there are many more.

The significant aspect of every story about Jesus and the women he met is that Jesus crossed all lines of propriety—religious and social. He did not do what was "proper" according to his day. His very actions were a challenge to the cherished traditions of his own people.

Jesus went so far as to commend women as examples of faith and spiritual

vitality—women who were not counted in the number at synagogue, who were isolated to a separate court at the Temple, women whose religious vows could be overturned by their husbands. In fact, in Jesus' culture where women were property and had no rights or privileges to call their own, it is surprising that the stories of these women were ever recorded and preserved in Scripture!

John the Baptist had been so radical as to baptize women who responded to his message. Jesus went even further in insulting people's religious sensitivities by allowing a band of women to accompany him and his disciples. The ultimate breach of religious custom is the story of Mary and Martha. Jesus taught Mary as he taught any man who was his disciple. The attitude of the other rabbis was "Better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman."²

Women were not educated in the synagogue nor at home. "He who teaches his daughter the law, teaches her lechery."³ As if it were not enough that Jesus taught Mary, he did even more when he chided Martha. Instead of worrying about fulfilling her socially prescribed role, she should have seized the importance of the moment like Mary. (See Luke 10:38-42).

The total effect of these stories is that Jesus' evaluation of women far outstripped the most expansive and tolerant in his day. His attitude and actions continually surprised even his disciples who knew him well. The tone of his ministry was *not to* accept the status quo, but to model a new life and relationships for women. He challenged the sexist standards of his world: the lustful glance of an adulterous heart (Matt. 5:27-28); the casual divorce, a male prerogative (Matt. 19:3-9)⁴; or the threat of the most fearful punishment—applied unfairly—only to the adulterous woman (John 8:1-11).⁵

None of these stories would be approved, much less applauded, outside of the early church that preserved them. In fact, they may well have opened the church to criticism and contempt. And yet, somehow, the gospel could not be told without them. Such events were so integral to the reality of the Jesus community that they comprised a part of the gospel.

You may have noticed that none of the women following Jesus became one of the "the twelve." None of the apostles were women. You are right! But no Gentile or slave was allowed that privilege either. And for this discussion we must remember that neither Greek nor slave was excluded from the ministry, the leadership, and offices of the early church.

Women in the Early Church

Women were an essential part of the Jesus community that waited for the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:14-15). These women were among those who received the Spirit and proclaimed the gospel in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:1-4). There are two types of evidence in the New Testament that women continued to be an integral part of the life and ministry of the early church.

I. Lists of Women

One type of evidence in the New Testament that must be considered is the brief references to women identified as participating in various aspects of the ministry of the church. Philip the evangelist is noted not for his own gift and ministry, but rather for his four daughters who had the gift of prophesy (which, by the Apostle Paul's estimation, was the highest gift).

Priscilla, listed in several epistles in the New Testament, evidently had quite a reputation. (See Acts 18:2, 18, 26; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:3-4; 2

Timothy 4:19—How many other persons were referred to as often or in such a variety of texts?) Her distinction is that she, along with Aquila, taught Apollos (Acts 18:26).

In a society in which women were not recognized, Priscilla was listed along with her husband. Even more, her ministry was prominent enough for her to be referred to first in the pair in four out of the six references. By calling Priscilla a "fellow worker" in Christ Jesus, the Apostle Paul accorded Priscilla, as well as Aquila, an equal place among other workers such as Timothy (Rom. 16:21), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Luke (Phile. 24), and Apollos and himself (1 Cor. 3:9). The same term was also applied to other women, Euodia and Syntyche, who were leaders at Philippi.

Phoebe is called a "minister." (Translators called her a "servant." This is the only place in the New Testament where that word "minister" has been translated as "servant"—only in the case of Phoebe). The same term for "minister" was applied to the leaders Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5), Timothy (1 Tim. 4:6), and Paul (1 Cor. 3:5).

Four women are listed in the closing instructions of Paul's letter to the Romans: Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis. He said they had "worked hard" in the Lord. The Apostle Paul said the same thing about the ministry of other leaders in the church (1 Cor. 16:15-16; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17).

These brief references to women show that they played a significant role in the early church as leaders. Their function in ministry is defined by the same terms applied to the ministry of men. It is obvious that the church went against the cultural values of the day when it recognized the value and ministry of women.

II. Evidence of Participation

One of the strongest evidences for the ministry and participation of women in the worshiping community comes from 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. This text is about women who had shamefully discarded their veils in public worship. In his apostolic correction Paul instructed those women that *when* they prophesied (preached) and prayed in public services, they must wear veils. He did not teach against their praying or prophesying. He simply said that when they did lead, they must wear their veils. Evidently, he assumed that women would participate according to their spiritual gifts, which are given to all—regardless of religious, social, or sexual distinctions for "the common good" (12:7).

I am not aware of any group in the Church of God that requires that women wear veils in public worship. These scriptural instructions have been understood to be cultural and timebound instructions that do not apply today. Most of us recognize that there is a difference between such "cultural instructions" and "eternal principles." The questions then remain: Where do we draw the line? The Corinthian women, in their newfound freedom and value in Christ, were exercising their "rights" and discarding their veils. And just as the Apostle had counseled that personal "rights" be set aside for the sake of the gospel in the principle of "nonoffense" in the previous three chapters, the Apostle appealed for the veil.

Verse three of chapter 11 gives another basis for the wearing of the veil. It makes one of the basic statements referred to often in the discussion about women in ministry: "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and head of Christ is God" (NIV). While it seems obvious that the Apostle Paul is appealing to some sort of order here, the meaning

and application of the statement is much less obvious. This statement is made to support the argument that women ought not to take off their veils in their exercise of ministry (public prayer and prophesy). Whatever his statement does mean here, the Apostle Paul certainly never meant for his argument to be used to limit the participation or leadership of women in public worship. It is meant rather to maintain the "natural" (cultural) traditions of head coverings.

The term that the Apostle Paul used in his argument, "head," is most often translated elsewhere in the New Testament as "origin" or "source." Translated by these terms, "head" comes to mean something very different. If the translation "head" is used, we think in terms of "lord," or "ahead of." This passage is used by many people to promote something very near to idolatry of men by women: women owe men what men owe Christ. Yes, Paul was appealing to the order of creation from Genesis 2:18-23. But he did not go so far as to claim that woman is the *image* as well as the glory of man (11:7). Woman, too, shares the image of God—and therefore is not more removed from God than man is. Genesis 1:27 and 5:2 make that clear.⁶

Paul made a summary statement in verse 10. "For this reason and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a 'sign of authority' on her head" (NIV). The translation of this text is misleading. The Greek term is simply *authority*, and so the text should be translated as it is: "woman should have authority on her head." It should not be translated to "sign of authority" or "veil" on her head.⁷ The angels mentioned here were thought of as guardians of the created order. They must not be offended by discarding the veil that was a sign of the created difference of the sexes.

But now the veil not only symbolizes woman's glorification of man but also her authority to play an active role in worship. "That is, her veil represents the new authority given to women under the new dispensation to do things which formerly had not been permitted."⁸ This understanding is supported by the two verses following this statement. Having argued for natural differences between man and woman, Paul then laid down a new principle of mutuality and interdependence also based upon creation. (See 1 Corinthians 7:3-5.)

Three chapters after the Apostle's discussion in Chapter 11 in 1 Corinthians come words that are seemingly contradictory: "Women should keep silence in the churches" (14:33-36). But it is obvious from the reference in chapter 11 that *it cannot mean* that women are *not* allowed to participate in public worship. Could the same Apostle who had just assumed that women "pray and prophesy" in worship services and who enabled and applauded women who worked "alongside" him in the ministry be saying now that they are not allowed that role?

The best solution is to recognize the special use of the verb "speak" (*lalein*). Here it means "inspired speech." The picture drawn by 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 and by the whole epistle is a sad one of some women who aspired to be charismatic teachers, claiming special revelations in inspired speech. They believed that their teachings were so "spiritual" that they were above the usual corrections of the congregation and the Apostles. They were so sure of their superiority that the Apostle Paul was led to sarcasm: "Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?" (1 Cor. 14:36, NIV).

The instruction to "ask their husbands at home" is a response to the challenge these women presented to their husbands in public assembly. The verb

"ask" (*eperotan*) means to ask a question in the sense of an interrogation. In the same way as they challenged apostolic authority and disrupted the services, these women were demanding and argumentative. This is consistent with the larger picture of the women in the Corinthian church. These women had become abusive of their newfound freedoms. They discarded their veils (11:5) and practiced a negative spirituality full of pride and competition. The same sort of problem is evidently behind the discussion in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 where arrogant women aspired to be teachers of things they did not know.

The above discussions of the participation of women in public worship and lists of women who led in the early church all bear evidence to the fact that women did function in ministry in the early church. While there is no information about "office" (like pastor or apostle) here, there is no question but that "function" (ministry) occurred. (And it was more than teaching the children or leading the Women of the Church of God.)

In the next issue we will deal with all those passages in the New Testament which talk about women being "submissive." It will also be important to look at some other passages in the New Testament like Acts 2:17-21 and Galatians 3:28. You may want to read ahead and be thinking carefully about what God desires for the church.

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Endnotes

¹ John W. V. Smith, *Herald of a Brighter Day* (Anderson, Ind: Gospel Trumpet Company, 1955), 126.

² Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos as quoted in Jeremias' *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 373.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "The right to divorce was exclusively the husband's." Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, 370. Jeremias adds that public stigma and the requirement that the financial agreement in the marriage contract be honored, and the money be returned, acted as a deterrent for hasty divorce. Therefore, the Hillelite provision for a capricious divorce was not necessarily fulfilled. This issue does expose the attitudes of the day, however.

⁵ The popular attitude of the day was that women were responsible for all sexual temptation and therefore sexual sin.

⁶ C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 248, 249.

⁷ As many commentators have recognized, the term is Paul's normal word for "authority" which includes the sense of active exercise (and not passive reception of it as some have claimed). See David M. Scholer, "Women in Ministry," *The Covenant Companion*, December 1983- February 1984, 17. See also Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 353-4 and M. D. Hooker, *New Testament Studies*, x, 410-416. n.d.

⁸ Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 255.